

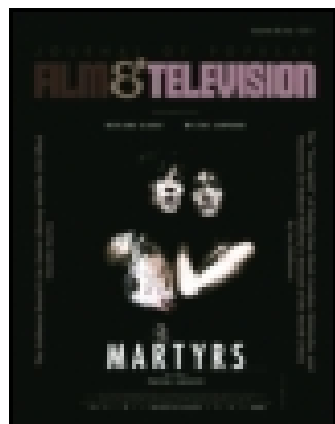
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The Female Grotesque: Gargoyles in the Cathedrals of Cinema

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The Female Grotesque: Gargoyles in the Cathedrals of Cinema

By M. C. KOLBENSCHLAG

"The man who does not know sick women does not
know women."

— Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, 1888

A few years ago, a photographer named Diane Arbus was attracting critical attention because of her fascination with "freaks."

Curiously, the filmmakers that are her survivors in the seventies seem to have a similar obsession. Arbus's grotesque images are predominantly female — either in terms of the photographic subject or its significance. Likewise, the films of the seventies have been populated with the "grotesque" female: prostitutes, neurotic spinsters, schizos, nymphs, alcoholics, flaks and other crazies. The best roles for a woman in this generation of films have been ones in which she is portrayed as eccentric or "sick," "under the influence" or even "possessed."

The real obsession of the contemporary filmmakers, however, is not women — it is men. The appearance of the female as "grotesque" in films is in part the obverse of the phenomenon of directorial narcissism. *Welcome to L.A.* is a classic example of this narcissism: a navel-gazing "hero," surrounded by a constellation of hysterical, weird, or crazy females. He drifts through the plot, static and detached. The audience is manipulated into identifying with him as a convenient central consciousness, which is a kind of overstatement. No real sympathy for him is evoked, and the three women characters are so eccentric that sympathy with them is constantly undercut. As if to underscore her own role, Geraldine Chaplin twice

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

repeats a line of undigested scriptorial theme: "The sleep of reason brings forth monsters." The quotation from Goya, the master of the "grotesque," is perhaps more eloquent than the writer realized, expressive of the contemporary filmmaker's inability to conceptualize and project directorial ego through female characters.

Valentino, an even less distinguished film, exemplifies the same choreography. Only in this film our sympathies for the hero are successfully invoked – Valentino is portrayed as a kind of Adonis pursued by a bizarre flock of maenads. The aura that is evoked around him, in a succession of female encounters, is campy and freakish, a poor imitation of Fellini. Aside from other flaws like the weak script, poor acting, gratuitous tangos and nude scenes, it is the pantheon of female grotesques that constitutes one of the most blatant examples of cinematic manipulation on the contemporary scene.

The grotesque has a long history in the aesthetic expressions of Western civilization. When the grotesque appears in nature it is designated as a "freak." The true freaks are the dwarfs, giants, bearded ladies, hermaphrodites, elephantine bodies, zombies, feral children, Siamese twins, one-eyed and three legged creatures that we associate with the circus. For, in fact, it is only in the circus that freaks can make their existence visible, only there that they can congregate as a populace – elsewhere, in conventional society, they are isolated, hidden, disguised. Freaks are threatening and disruptive because they challenge conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, plant and animal, life and death. They disrupt the proper "scale" of the universe, they disorder the basic "distinctions" which constitute our sense of reality.

In art, the "grotesque" has a similar effect. One of the most distinctive elements of the genre is its power to project a confusion between a sense of the comic and the experience of horror, "an unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response." The grotesque blurs boundaries, mingles polarities, fuses the bizarre with the beautiful, elicits terror as well as amusement. Petronius, Rabelais, Poe, Gogol, Bosch, Breughel, Kafka, Grasse, Lovecraft, Goya and Chagall – the pantheon of the masters of the grotesque is a broad spectrum, but the elements of the genre are remarkably consistent.



Woman as schizoid nymphomaniac. Diane Keaton in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*.

Thomas Mann's definition of the grotesque seems especially pertinent to the distortion and freakishness that characterizes female representation in the contemporary film: "The grotesque is that which is excessively true and excessively real, not that which is arbitrary, false, unreal, and absurd."¹ From this perspective the grotesque is an expression of fear of life and of reality, rather than fear of death, annihilation or mutilation. It is precisely this quality of the experience of the grotesque which links it to the phenomenon of misogyny.

Historically misogyny has roots in the dualistic distinctions imposed on reality: distinctions between mind and body, reason and emotion, spirituality and carnality, and so on. The dualities, in fact, have been translated into familiar social hierarchies, paradigms for all sorts of "natural" inferior-superior relationships between subject and object, master and slave, white and non-white, man and woman, doctor and patient. As civilization became increasingly

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

patriarchal, femaleness and femininity were identified more and more with the so-called "inferior" powers of human nature. Whatever was dark, wet, irrational, sensual, emotional, "close to nature" was the "sphere" and special faculty of woman — and hence, capable of eliciting sentiment as well as disgust, fear as well as shame. Femaleness was regarded as distortion of maleness, a woman was a "misbegotton male." Femininity became a kind of grotesque humanity.

Misogyny, understood as a cultural rather than a personal phenomenon, functions as a structuring principle of social reality. Certain qualities are associated with "femaleness," and these female-associated behaviors acquire connotations of inferiority. Women as well as men absorb the metaphoric constellations of "masculinity" and "femininity" within the framework of a culture which attributes dominance and preference to masculine qualities, behaviors. Inevitably, artists construct their plots, select their characters and shape their fictions within the ambience of this metaphorical bias — to a greater or lesser degree.

Moreover, the fear, hatred and rejection of the "condition of being feminine" is one of the most constant themes in American cultural expressions from Cooper and Melville to Hemingway and Mailer — not to mention the weight of evidence to be found in the conduct and advice manuals from the Puritans to the present era. That "misogyny" is a prevailing ethos in our culture is evident. What is significant is that in the contemporary film the "grotesque" seems to be an expression of it.

One of the commonly accepted characteristics of the grotesque is its affinity with the "physically abnormal."² This element obviously connects with the antipathy for female anatomy, and the expressions of denigration and disgust which have always been associated with misogyny. The film *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* is a case in point. It manages to merge this important aspect of the grotesque with the misogynist attitude. Theresa Dunne is archetypally grotesque, the victim of a congenitally deformed spine, cursed with a limp and a hideous scar on her back. Although the film mutes the grotesque aspect by casting a rather ingenuous and rehabilitated Diane Keaton, the "cosmetic" treatment does not remove the metaphorical association. The misogynist overtones are even heavier: Theresa is a rather

schizoid nymphomaniac, a disguised masochist who unloads the conditioned guilt of her misshapen "Catholic" upbringing by grooving on kinky sex. Her first male lover reveals the context that envelopes Theresa's image very explicitly: "I can't stand women right after I have fucked them." Theresa Dunne is an exemplar and object of all the worst fears and punishing recriminations of the misogynist consciousness.

The image of woman as "temptress," "witch," and demonic source of evil has also been a constant motif in the misogynist tradition. We have recently witnessed in the contemporary film a unique expression of the affinity of corruption with femininity. A succession of innocent ingenues and pubertal girls have been invaded by demonic influence: from *Rosemary's Baby* to *The Exorcist* and *Carrie*. The violations implied or executed are grotesque in the ultimate sense of the word: the seat of innocence perverted and corrupted by a transcendent source of evil. Here again the essence of the grotesque is magnified: the coexistence of the beautiful with the repulsive, the sublime with the gross, the carnal with the spiritual. The explicit connection that *Carrie's* preternatural power has with the onset of her menstruation is evidence, however, of the misogynist sources that contaminate Brian De Palma's cinematic vision. The association of blood and demonic vengeance throughout the film resonates with the primordial female phobia which lies at the core of the film.

The recurrence of the demonic theme in connection with the "feminine" in contemporary cinema suggests the onset of a major sociological dislocation at the roots of existence. Kayser, a major theoretician of the grotesque, observes that its ultimate characteristic is "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world"³ and that its appearance in history varies considerably in density and intensity. According to Kayser, "Structurally it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view have become inapplicable."⁴ It is primarily an expression of our failure to orient ourselves in an alienated world. This is why suddenness, surprise, catastrophe, apocalyptic events, monstrosities are conjured up — they reflect our own paranoid perception of a disturbed and dislocated universe.

There are other expressions of the grotesque in contemporary film

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

which suggest that the source of this dislocation and the impetus for the distortion of the female image lie in the social phenomenon of changing sexual roles, a phenomenon that has been enormously accelerated in the 1970's. The emergence of women in the public sphere and the imminent transformation of their domestic role has threatened male identity and hegemony. Vietnam and Watergate have dealt serious blows to "masculine" social and political values.



Woman as bitch goddess. Faye Dunaway in *Network*.

The total effect of all these changes? A cracked mirror — the expected roles, scenarios, constellations are suddenly shattered. Understandably, the residual misogynistic reflex surfaces with a vengeance — from sadomasochistic pornography in its most virulent form, to the grotesque caricatures of its more pedestrian expressions.

The sadistic impulse has always been an aspect of the grotesque, in terms of content as well as artistic motive; and even more importantly, in terms of audience response. The "barbaric delight" inspired

by the grotesque is one of the mysteries of human experience. The grotesque figure, as a result, is often portrayed as both victim and victimizer — a perfect object for sadism, a masked form of vengeance and self-hate. Two of the more serious films of the seventies cast a female in precisely such a role: the bitch goddesses of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Network*. Both of these women — Big Nurse and her counterpart, the program director — are perfect objects for misogynist catharsis. Audiences cheer when they get their comeuppance, when they are threatened with violence or failure. Actresses who play this kind of role — like their predecessor Bette Davis, who excelled in playing grotesque females — are more likely to win awards and accolades.

In both *Network* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the dominant male roles are just as grotesque: one is a psychopath, the other a neurotic-hysteric. But somehow the ethos of the film evokes sympathy for the male kook, and hostility for the female bitch. The male is represented as the manipulated victim or puppet; the female as the devouring ego in a curious inversion of the patriarchal norm. The female grotesque in these films is clearly another expression of the fixation that Leslie Fiedler has described as the flaw in American literature:

Our great novelists, though experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror, tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of a novel. Indeed, they rather shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature woman, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejections or fear of sexuality.⁵

Another common expression of the grotesque is its association with irrationality. As Kayser notes, "The encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque."⁶ Madness represents a region inaccessible to the rational being. In popular culture it is almost exclusively the domain of women. Characteristically, some of the best films of the seventies deal with schizophrenia, addiction and obsession — and all of them feature a female in the central role: *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, and *The Story of Adele H.*

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

The contrast between the best female roles of the 1970's and those of the 1930's illuminates the function of the grotesque in contemporary film even more. In the great "queen" movies of the thirties (*Queen Christina*, *Catherine the Great*) it is the men, frequently the male consorts, who are the grotesques. Likewise, the typical "woman's film" of the thirties featured a self-conscious female go-getter or career woman who could hold her own with a man. "Over and over again, the woman's film established the dilemma of the strong woman tied down to a weak man who wrecked her life as he destroyed his own."⁷ Although the woman often finds her liberation through attachment to a better man in the plot denouement, the context of the films often celebrates female autonomy, assertiveness and androgyny.

The proliferation of female grotesques in the contemporary film is a kind of resurgence of female energy — but for the most part they represent a male projection of that emergence. The difficulty arises in the problem of accepting a woman as the dominant consciousness or central, controlling ego in a film. The unfamiliarity of the role activates what Aristotle would have called the "principle of non-identification" as opposed to the principle of "identification." The latter makes tragedy and melodrama possible, but "non-identification" makes ironic detachment necessary. It is as though men, confronted with an irreversible change in the status and social function of women, are rendered incapable of empathy for them in their new roles and can only deal with the new image by rendering it in grotesque forms. Thus the grotesque distortion is a function of threatened social change.

The projection of this fear and anxiety through the grotesque explains what Doty calls its "emphasis on ridicule, surprise, and virulence through caricature, the deformation and distortion of salient characteristics."⁸ Few films demonstrate these qualities as acutely as Robert Altman's *Three Women*. Its origins in dream contents makes it all the more intriguing as an example of this unique genre. In this film, male characters are merely peripheral — Shelley Duvall and Sissy Spacek consume the ego-space of the narrative. Janice Rule as the mute, reclusive muralist is a third female consciousness. The sterile, California baroque of the Purple Sage apartments and the aseptic zombie-world of the retirement spa add

a bizarre landscape to the constellation of grotesques provided by the three female figures: a compulsive product of *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* magazine, an adolescent personality constantly on the verge of transference or dissolution, and a silent psyche immersed in the private world of her imagination. All three are desperately in need of someone to care, to communicate with, to be intimate with. All three have been shafted directly or indirectly by the indifference and mechanized behavior of men, of the "others." We identify with their problem, but not with the female characters — they are too grotesque. And so the effect of the film is one of allegory.

Among the many interpretations that occur to the viewer is the Freudian paradigm of superego, ego and id to explain the "triadic" relationship between the three women. The mural motif, like the lives of the characters, is grimly grotesque — the classical figures depicted seem to suggest that women in their compulsive need of, and competition for men, ignore, hurt and even kill each other. Ironically it is the male stud who is killed in the film and the three women, like victorious maenads, form a "grotesque" family at the end — a parody of the normal constellation of provider, life-bearer



Women as projections of fear and anxiety. Sissy Spacek and Shelley Duvall in *Three Women*.

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

and child. The bizarre aspects of the film – and the extreme distancing that it effects – led one reviewer to query whether Altman was “exorcising some sort of masculine guilt.”⁹ The observation is to the point. Are not the female figures, in fact, artistic projections of the submerged subconscious commingling of the conflicting images of woman that harass the contemporary male? The film is another example of the self-reflexive tendency in current cinema and contains its own doom – it lays the director-auteur on the couch. Nevertheless, it remains enormously interesting as an example of the difficulty of achieving psychological iconoclasm in art.

The role of the grotesque in the contemporary film transcends mere psychological considerations, however. Ultimately it raises political and epistemological questions. From this perspective, the films of Lina Wertmüller are perhaps most representative of the use of the female grotesque for reactionary purposes. Her films are populated with whores, gargantuan earth mothers, psychotics, capitalist shrews, female Nazis and other assorted uglies, crazies, rejects or bitches. This in itself would be less significant if it were not for the constellation of characters that repeats in most of her films. The central consciousness of the film is always an ingenuous picaresque male – whom the audience identifies with and who represents the “normal.” The chorus of women choreographed around the hero is usually an assorted group of caricatures: eccentric, deformed or defamed, bizarre and threatening, characteristically and consciously grotesque, evoking a sense of the “abnormal” and of “nonidentification” in the audience. We see the constellation most clearly in *Love and Anarchy*, in *The Seduction of Mimi* and in *Seven Beauties*. Variations on the same relationship-construct appear in *All Screwed Up* and in *Swept Away*.

Wertmüller’s bias is illuminated even more clearly by comparing her films with the “prostitute” films of the late 1930’s. For example, the constellation of a film like *Marked Woman* (much the same as a Wertmüller cast) nevertheless evokes more sympathy and identification with the female heroines than with the male district attorney who anchors the action. The portrayal of the women, particularly of the lead (Bette Davis), is complex, realistic and unsentimental. There is a minimum of grotesque caricature and distancing effects. The camera and script render the women honestly, so that their humanity

— rather than their function in the plot, or their metaphorical presence — emerges as the dominant impression and center of empathy in the film.

If the appearance of the grotesque is, as many aesthetic philosophers suggest, a sign of a threatened subversion of an established order, then Wertmuller's films are a political response to the changing threshold of male-female relations in the contemporary era. The male central consciousness of her films represents the unchanging aspect of the social order. Significantly this role is played by the same actor in each film — the choice of Giancarlo Giannini as the sympathetic center of all her films is suggestive of the social inertia which lies at the core of Wertmuller's artistic vision. The Wertmuller women — the whores in *Love and Anarchy*, the seduced wife in *Mimi*, the bourgeois shrew in *Swept Away*, the Nazi commandant in *Seven Beauties* — grow more grotesque and fantastic with each new film. They are icons which represent the threatened reversal of the social order and the persistent male fantasy that excuses the virulence of patriarchy: the myth that women really dominate men. The sadistic humiliations that some of her female characters endure or perpetrate reveal that Wertmuller has fallen into a basic cliché of our popular culture: the tendency to portray woman "as a symbol of capitalism, materialism, puritanism, or whatever repressive force is victimizing the beleaguered male."¹⁰ Her films are cleverly choreographed parables of patriarchy.

Altman's film *Three Women* seems less politically nostalgic. But like Wertmuller, he compulsively costumes the "new order" in grotesque images. The conclusion of his film does not resurrect the "norm" of patriarchy; but the grotesque matriarchal triad that supplants it alludes to another popular male fantasy — the horrors of a self-sustaining hegemony of women and the consequent disposability of men. Thus the presence of the grotesque in contemporary film, as in contemporary literature, is a response to dislocations in social politics. It can, therefore, be prophetic at the same time that it is reactionary. As Wm. Van O'Connor has suggested, "The grotesque affronts our sense of established order and satisfies or partly satisfies, our need for at least a tentative, a more and flexible ordering."¹¹ Altman's film may be just that.

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

Inevitably we must inquire whether any films have successfully represented the female ego as a central consciousness without falling into the cliché of grotesque caricature. Two films stand out: one low-mimetic or comic, and the other high-mimetic and tragic, in the classical sense. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* features a woman, for a change, in the central role of "picaro." The treatment could have been grotesque, since the absurd predicaments she encounters could easily be distorted for effect. The actress and director, however,



Vanessa Redgrave and Jane Fonda in *Julia*.

succeed in eliciting audience identification with a fundamental quality of humanness and autonomy. Alice dominates the screen; the best lines and situations are hers. And we think of her as a normative type.

More recently we have the example of *Julia*, a significant cinematic achievement for a number of reasons. Not only is the central character and dominant consciousness female (How often in films or

on TV is the “voice over” female!), but the relationship between the two women is the core and context of the film itself. Love between women is a great “unknown” in our popular culture and the temptation to distort is overwhelming (e.g., the grotesque parody of the friendship of Nazimova and Natacha in *Valentino*.) While the script has obvious flaws, *Julia* is an important film, for it evokes enormous empathy in the audience and a sense of emotional credibility. It manages to combine the old fascination of a passion that can transcend time and distance with the new fascination of women involved in world-making enterprises.

Another film, *The Turning Point*, is a landmark. Again, the focus on a central — even double — female consciousness distinguishes it from the usual fare of the 1970's. Almost all of the ego-space in the film is taken up by females who are enormously interesting, complex and believable human beings. Again, the triad becomes the main-spring of the emotional conflict: the ambivalent and fluctuating feelings of mother, mentor and tyro-daughter are portrayed with subtlety as well as starkness.

The film is distinctive in another way, in its attempt to deal with a significant life segment of the two principal female characters and to show them coping in middle-age with the inevitable consequences of decisions made early in life. This kind of telescopic view is rare enough in films about men. It is an enormous leap in the evolution of females into something more than ephemeral, peripheral, forever-nubile participants in the drama of existence.

Some cinematic seers are predicting that the 1980's will be the “decade of women” in film. If these films are the precursors, then may their tribe increase. But the persistence of the female grotesque will not be eliminated by mere multiplication of female directors, script writers and subjects. Like sexism and misogyny, its roots go deep — in women as well as men. Too often the appearance of the grotesque in the contemporary film has been a variation of the “Us and Them” syndrome: whatever is difficult, mysterious, threatening or new, we “grotesquefy.” Real freaks are born. The freaks that populate our films are fairy tales of our own shame and awe, of our own fear and failure.

Diane Arbus, although biased toward photographing freaks, did not indulge in such selectivity with the camera. Her style was dis-

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

tinctively ego-centrifugal: "I work from awkwardness . . . By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself."^{1 2} Perhaps the wizards of the contemporary cinema need to arrange themselves a little more and their female subjects a little less.

NOTES

- ¹Thomas Mann, "Reflections of An Unpolitical Man", cited in Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) p. 158.
- ²Philip Thomson, *The Grottesque* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1972), p. 9.
- ³W. Kayser, op. cit., 188.
- ⁴W. Kayser, op. cit., 185.
- ⁵Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1960, 1966), 24.
- ⁶W. Kayser, op. cit., 184.
- ⁷Jeanine Basinger, "When Women Wept," *American Film*, September, 1977, p. 53.
- ⁸Robert Doty, *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grottesque in American Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), Introduction.
- ⁹Richard Schickel, "Dreamscape," *Time* magazine, May 2, 1977.
- ¹⁰Ellen Willis, "Is Lina Wertmuller Just One of the Boys?" *Rolling Stone*, March 25, 1976.
- ¹¹William Van O'Connor, *The Grottesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 19.
- ¹²Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus*, An Aperture Monograph, 1972, p. 12.

The epigraph is quoted in B. Ehrenreich and D. English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*, Feminist Press, 1973, p. 25.

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